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ABSTRACT

A study of community college students' use of educational support systems was conducted at the City Colleges of Chicago. The study sought to determine: (1) the level of usage of formal support systems (e.g., teachers, class participation, counselors, tutors, libraries, and other learning resources); (2) the level of usage of informal support systems (e.g., friends, classmates, and study groups); (3) the correlation among the use of various support systems; and (4) the relationship between the use of support systems and students' attitudes toward peer assistance, educational expectations, high school grade point average (GPA), and course grade. Students were asked to indicate whether they never, sometimes, often, or always engaged in eight formal support activities and seven informal support activities. Responses from 120 students revealed that, among formal support systems, raising hands in class to ask questions was the most frequently engaged in activity, while consulting tutors received the lowest use rating. Among informal supports, helping other students received the highest frequency rating, while study groups were the least frequently used support system. Students who used these support systems tended to have higher educational expectations, friends with higher expectations, higher high school GPA's, and higher course grades than students who did not use these supports. Data tables corresponding to questionnaire items are included. (KL)

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Community College Students' Use of Institutional and Informal Learning Resources

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Community College Students' Use of Institutional and Informal Learning Resources

This study is concerned with two-year community college students' use of formally instituted support systems and of informal educational support systems. We have defined formal support systems as those which are available on the college campus and in the classroom such as libraries, learning resource centers, teachers, tutors, and counselors. Informal support systems are peer study groups, review groups and other peer self-help techniques which are not inherently part of the instutionalized college.

One purpose of the study is to determine the level of usage of formal and informal support systems according to students' self-reports. A second purpose is to demonstrate the relationships among uses of various types of student support systems and the relationship between their use and students' achievement and educational expectations. This study is primarily concerned with two related questions: "What formal and informal support systems do students rely on?" and "Do the students who use these learning resources have high achievement and educational expectations?"

Student involvement in instruction is an educational concept that is highly relevant to this research. Students who are actively involved in the instructional process tend to be more academically successful than less involved students. Involvement is a broad concept. Researchers have studied involvement in many different ways, including attending school and classes, (Wiley and Harnisfeger, 1974), paying attention in class (Bloom, 1976; Stallings, 1980), asking questions of the teacher and oneself (Hecht, 1978), and making use of out-of-class computer aided instruction (Dimas, 1980). In all examples, involvement has been

positively related to school achievement. When students use the formal or informal support systems as we have defined them, they are involved in instruction.

The concept of cooperative group work is also related to informal support systems. The research literature contains abundant evidence of the positive effects of cooperative group work on student achievement (for example, Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1980). The importance of student involvement and the effectiveness of group cooperation underpin this research.

METHOD

Questionnaire

Students' use of formal and informal support systems was measured with a 29 item questionnaire. The questionnaire contains eight items about formal, institutional supports (teachers, class participation, counselors, tutors, libraries, and other learning resources), and seven items about informal peer support (friends, classmates, and study groups). In addition to these two major subscales, the questionnaire contains items about attitudes toward peer assistance, educational expectations, estimates of time involved in student support systems, and high school grade point average. Students responded to the first 15 items (the formal and informal support subscales) by means of a four point Likert-type scale, marked "always," "usually," "sometimes," and "never." The remaining items had between four and eight response categories. The student questionnaire had been previously pilot-tested, checked for reliability, and revised.

Student Sample

Approximately 120 students enrolled in City Colleges of Chicago completed the student questionnaires. These students were enrolled in

classes taught by four instructors, all of whom participated in a staff development seminar at the City Colleges. The four teachers each administered questionnaires to two of their class sections. The subject areas taught by these teachers included biology, business, English composition, and mathematics. Nearly all of the students in this sample had at one time or another been strongly encouraged to use all of the support systems that are mentioned in the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The mean ratings of each of the eight informal support items are presented in Table 1. As the table indicates, "raising hands in class" is the item with the highest response, and "consulting tutors" has the lowest response. The mean response to the "raising hands in class" item is close to the value of "often" response category, while the response to the "consulting tutors" item is equal to the "sometimes" category. The items appear to represent a hierarchy of involvement from the most commonly used -- participation in the classroom, to the other extreme -- staying after class, visiting teachers, or consulting tutors. The middle ground also contains items that represent out-of-class activities -- using learning resources, meeting with counselors, and using the college library. The only unexpected result among these is the low frequency with which students report visiting teachers' offices.

The correlation coefficients among those 8 items range between .15 and .49, with a median correlation of .32. The total subscale is correlated .34 with a response to the question "How many hours have you spent altogether this semester in the library, learning center, at PLATO, using other learning aids, or visiting a professor, tutor, or counselor?"

Table 2 contains the mean ratings of the informal support activities. The item receiving the highest mean rating was "helping others" and that with the lowest rating was "getting together to study for exams." Again, there is continuum of involvement among these items ranging from talking to other students and discussing class material to calling other students, meeting out of class, and studying together with other students for exams. In an absolute sense, the mean ratings for these items range from slightly lower than "often" to slightly above "sometimes."

These items are correlated to each other somewhat more highly than the formal support items. The range of correlation coefficients is between .21 and .60, and the median coefficient is .35. The total subscale is correlated .31 with responses to the question, "How many hours have you spent this semester outside of class discussing school work with other students?"

Generally speaking, the correlations between students' use of formal and informal supports are weakly but positively related to students' educational expectations, their high school grade point average (self-report) and their end-of-semester course grade. Students who indicate using more formal and informal supports have higher educational expectations for themselves, have friends with high educational expectations, have higher high school grades and received higher grades in the semester of this questionnaire, than students who use fewer formal and informal supports. The correlation coefficients between the variations are reported in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

This investigative study has shown what ratings community college students gave to various levels of involvement in instruction and

education. We looked at involvement from two perspectives -- formal and institutional ways of getting involved in college, and informal, peer-oriented involvement. The data suggest a continuum of involvement within each of the two subscales. A more detailed analysis of the hierarchy of response should follow this study. In addition, the possibility of an "critical" degree of involvement should be studied.

The current data do suggest a link between these measures of involvement and achievement and expectations. The reasons why students favor certain types of involvement and how other types can be encouraged is a logical step to follow from this point.

TABLE 1

Mean Ratings of Formal Support Items

Mean *	Standard Deviation	Item
2.90	0.94	I raise my hand in class to ask questions when I don't understand a topic.
2.61	0.85	In class I contribute to discussions and answer questions that the teacher and other students bring up.
2.57	0.93	I use the college learning resources (PLATO, if available, audio or audio-visual cassettes, and other learning aids) to supplement my classroom experiences.
2.34	0.97	I use the college library to look up additional books or magazines for my classes.
2.33	0.95	I discuss my plans, goals, and college work with counselors on campus.
2.14	0.81	I go to a teacher's office to ask questions when I need help.
2.13	0.76	I stay a few minutes after class to continue discussions or to ask questions.
2.00	1.00	I consult tutors at college when I need extra help with a class.

*1.00 = Never, 2.00 = Sometimes, 3.00 = Often, 4.00 = Always

TABLE 2

Mean Ratings of Informal Support Items

Mean *	Standard Deviations	Item
2.91	0.88	When I know the class material well I help other students.
2.89	0.86	When I am with friends at the college we talk about classes and the material we are studying.
2.80	0.96	I discuss homework and other school problems with friends outside of the college.
2.46	0.97	When I am behind in a subject I go to friends for help.
2.35	0.97	If I don't understand an idea in class I will call a friend to ask about it.
2.26	0.86	I meet with other students from my classes to discuss work.
2.10	0.90	I get together with other students in my classes to study for exams.

*1.00 = Never, 2.00 = Sometimes, 3.00 = Often, 4.00 = Always

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Use of Format and Informal Supports and Achievement and Educational Expectations

	Educational Expectations (Self)	Educational Expectations (Friends)	High School GPA	Course Grade
Formal Supports	.14	.03	.21*	.23
Informal Supports	.17	.12	.22*	.16
Hours at formal support	.08	.01	.15	.33
Hours at informal support	.12	.19*	.16	-.01

N=104 to 110 for expectations and high school GPA, 31 for course grade

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